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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN GOVERNMENT TO STUDENTS: NO MINISKIRTS OR HIJABS

DUSHANBE 00000622 001.2 OF 002

¶1. SUMMARY: First it was gold teeth, then it was graduation parties and students driving to school, now girls in Tajikistan are fraught over the fact they will no longer be allowed to wear jewelry or miniskirts to school. In remarks to the press, President Rahmon said that students at public schools should not be allowed to spend money for extravagant graduation parties, and students are not to use cell phones in classes or drive cars to school. The Minister of Education, Abdujabbor Rahmonov has taken the president's informal commentary further and also ordered a new dress code, complaining that girls had been wearing revealing clothing, such as miniskirts, to school and too much jewelry. The new dress code gives the minister an excuse to reintroduce his informal ban on hijabs. This de facto order will be treated and enforced by education administrators as real legislation. PolOff met with Vahobjon Abdulazizov, Head of the International Relations Department at the Ministry of Education April 20 to discuss media reports of the Ministry's ban on hijabs and miniskirts. END SUMMARY

JUST A RECOMMENDATION?

¶2. Abdulazizov repeatedly emphasized that the new rules are not an official order from the government and will not be written into the law. However, teachers should enforce the new dress regulations. According to media reports the Minister of Education, Abdujabbor Rahmonov, promises to fire any teachers who do not comply. (Note: A professor from the Slavonic University told the Ambassador she had questioned this policy openly during a command meeting with Rahmonov last week; he confirmed "she would be fired" if she did not comply. End note.) Even though President Rahmon has spoken out publicly and ordered a ban on cell phones, graduation parties and students, he has not officially signed a presidential order or decree banning such activities. He also has not mentioned banning the hijab in public statements.

¶3. The Ministry will publish a brochure with pictures of acceptable dress for high school students. The brochure does not recommend one standard uniform and will permit western style dress as well as traditional Tajik dress. Girls are permitted to wear traditional Tajik head scarves, but not hijabs. Boys can wear traditional Tajik hats, but not Islamic prayer caps.

A MORE EQUAL SOCIETY?

¶4. Abdulazizov's rationale for the new dress code is to promote a more egalitarian learning environment. He explained that it is not fair for wealthy students to drive to school in nice cars, dripping with gold jewelry; it gives other students an inferiority complex and makes them feel too embarrassed to attend school. (Comment: Many Dushanbe residents quietly wonder whether President Rahmon's son will still drive one of his Porsches everyday to Tajik National University where he is enrolled. End comment.)

¶5. The ministry's justification for banning what essentially is an ostentatious display of wealth and returning to the appearance of communist era social equality is in line with President Rahmon's criticism of citizens with gold teeth and his public comments against Tajiks frivolously spending money on large post-funeral commemorations involving lavish meals for guests. Although such customs have long been a Tajik tradition, they are not a requirement in Islam. The president's argument is that Tajiks should save their money or spend it more wisely. (Note: Ironically, because "gold" capped teeth are much less expensive than porcelain crowns, his instructions may put a greater burden on the low-income, dentally-challenged. End Note.)

#### SECULARISM OR RESTRICTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

¶6. This is not the first time the Minister of Education has spoken out against the hijab. At a press conference in October 2005, he publicly stated that girls should not be allowed to wear hijabs in schools. The government later rescinded the statement and said that those were the minister's personal views and not an official order. Because it has not been an official order, some girls who had been expelled for wearing the hijab were readmitted. Since 2005, expelled girls have approached Islamic Renaissance Party members for help and the party has been successful reinstating most girls approaching university and high school administrators to explain the significance of

DUSHANBE 00000622 002.2 OF 002

the hijab. Islamic Renaissance Party officials told PolOff they fear that for every girl who approaches the party, many more remain silent and accept the expulsion, or turn to religious madrassas.

¶7. When PolOff pointed out the possible consequences of the law, including lower attendance among girls, resulting in a poorly educated female population, and girls turning to madrassas, Abdulazizov countered that a very small number of girls will actually be affected by the new rule. He argued that the girls do not actually want to wear hijabs themselves, but are forced to wear it by their parents and therefore will not likely turn to madrassas or grow up more religious. The local press quoted the Minister of Education as saying that "an oppositional party which is eagerly striving for power" persuaded the girls to wear hijabs.

¶8. Abdulazizov repeatedly justified the Ministry's decision to prohibit girls from wearing hijabs based on the fact that Tajikistan is a secular state. PolOff explained that a secular state asserts freedom of religion and does not interfere in the free practice of religion. The Minister's recent directive indicates that Tajikistan is not a secular state, but rather laical, which places a greater emphasis on citizens not engaging in religious practices in public at all. PolOff pointed out that the government is restricting religious freedom. Abdulazizov responded by offering an excuse that many Tajik bureaucrats frequently spout-that Tajikistan is a young country with only 15 years of independence; the United States should be patient.

¶9. COMMENT: The Ministry of Education believes that by implementing new dress regulations, it will force students to focus on learning and improve the quality of Tajik students. In a better world, instead of chastising students for the way they dress, the ministry would focus on penalizing students for bribing teachers and buying their diplomas and make efforts to

improve the quality of teaching, provide more textbooks, and expand schools so that students don't have to attend classes in shifts. Instead, the new edicts seem designed more to deflect attention from the serious afflictions of Tajikistan's crumbling education system rather than correct the shortcomings.

¶10. Abdulazizov would not comment on the source of the directive. If the education minister acted alone, it is disconcerting that no other ministers, government officials or parliamentarians, besides Muhiddin Kabiri of the Islamic Party, have spoken out against the ban of the hijab. It is unlikely though that the Minister of Education would have acted without the president's office's consent. Rahmon's new rules are what may be the beginning of a strange turn to an increasingly state-controlled society where the government interferes directly in people's daily lives.  
JACOBSON